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ABSTRACT

Trends and research in nongraded schooling over the past three decades are described in this paper. The 1960s and early 70s were marked by a strong interest in the nongradedness movement and the British concept of open education, followed by a declining interest in the 1970s. A nongraded revival in the 1980s was facilitated by recognition of the failure of the traditional American educational system, economic crisis, and the need for increased economic productivity. Nongradedness is proposed, not as one teaching model, but as a set of multiple strategies or an organizational system. A review of nongradedness research divides the principles of nongradedness into six clusters--goals of schooling, organization, curriculum, instruction, materials, and assessment. Each cluster is further delineated by six items. Nongradedness appears to be on the increase in the 1990s in the forms of school-based management, participative decision-making, and heterogeneous grouping. Adequate staff development and sufficient implementation time are necessary for success. One table is included. (18 references) (LMI)

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THE WAXING AND WANING OF NONGRADEDNESS

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THE WAXING AND WANING OF NONGRADEDNESS

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A nongraded school is one in which grade-level designations are not used for students or classes. Progress is reported by indicating the tasks completed and the manner of learning, not by A,B,C,D,E,F or G,S,U or similar rating systems. A team of teachers generally works with a team of students who are regrouped frequently according to student needs or interests and the particular task or activity. Most of these groups are multiage, heterogeneous groups learning together as they pursue complex problem solving activities and projects in interdisciplinary thematic units. Students are active participants in their learning and in the collection of multiple sources of documentation to be used for assessment and evaluation. Continuous pupil progress is not movement through a predetermined sequence of curriculum levels,, but an individual expansion of knowledge, skills and understanding.

The paragraph above describes nongradedness as was practiced at the Franklin Elementary School in Lexington, Massachusetts from 1957 to 1983. In the earlier years, the stress was on the team teaching component as a way to better meet students' individual needs by having more teachers and more grouping possibilities available. Anderson and others from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education were involved in the SUPRAD (School and University Program for Research and Development) project which

provided incentive for the new program. During these early Franklin years, Goodlad and Anderson were involved in writing The Nongraded Elementary School (1959) and it would be surprising if the book did not influence the Franklin experience.

Interest in nongradedness was strong during the 1960's and the early 1970's. Many articles of general interest were published and a considerable body of research comparing nongraded and graded school with results favoring nongradedness was generated (Pavan, 1973). Funding for creative and innovative projects was available from the federal government and a number of foundations so that the needed "start-up" costs were provided to many schools. In fact, this was a time when Americans had a more positive attitude than at present and believed that education could resolve our nation's problems.

A British import called open or informal education began to over-shadow interest in nongradedness during the early 1970's. American educators began to flock to Great Britain to see "open classrooms." In the best of these British classrooms, many located in Lancaster, the practices observed were closely attuned to the nongraded description given earlier. When British publications about open or informal education published at the time are examined, the source of their philosophy, as that of nongradedness, came from certain understandings of child development such as Piaget and from the work of people such as John Dewey. The famous Plowden report (1967) is one such document which also describes team teaching and reports visits to Harvard, the Franklin School

and other public schools and universities in the United States. After that report many British educators were visiting the Franklin School and I was invited to visit and speak in Bradford, England in 1974.

American receptivity to the British open education is explained by the close connection to that model and the major movements in 20th century American education. Squire (1972) brought together major writers in A New Look at Progressive Education which detailed some of the parallels between progressive education and the British primary school model, but failed to note any relationship to the American nongraded movement. The roots of nongradedness run deep in the progressive era of the 1920's and 1930's. The similarities of the underlying principles on which all three: progressive, nongraded, and open education, are based needs to be acknowledged. It would be instructive if we investigated our educational history more thoroughly.

So why did nongradedness appear to fade away in the late seventies? As with any other complex innovation, there is no one single cause, but a number of factors coming together which contributed to the waning of nongradedness. Depending on the geographic location of a school, declining enrollment hit school districts at varying years in the 1970's. With declining enrollments came the consolidation of schools which resulted in the closing of schools. If the nongraded programs were in the older schools which were the logical choice for school closing, then the nongraded program ended. This was the fate of the Franklin School

in 1983. However, there were other factors happening before that time which made it more difficult to maintain the program.

Declining enrollment often meant that teachers were assigned to a given school with teaching philosophies not compatible with nongradedness. When many teaching positions were available in a school district, teachers (and principals) could be placed in schools where there were compatible philosophies. Since money was no longer available for the intensive staff development needed to train new staff, the assignment by superintendents of teachers to a nongraded school who did not wish to teach in such a school, made continuance of such a program even more difficult. The existing staff would benefit from staff development to retain the level of invigoration such a commitment requires. In a few cases nongraded programs never were truly operational due to insufficient training for the staff from the beginning.

If funding for equipment and supplies is cut too drastically, staff members become frustrated as they perceive that their efforts are not appreciated by the community or the central office.

As with all innovations, there is a continued need for leadership. Frequently, the leaders are sought after for other programs and so leave. If this happens before the program is institutionalized or before others have assumed complete ownership, the program generally falters.

However, there were also certain aspects of the 1970's that contributed to the waning of nongradedness. Open education became associated with free school, lack of structure, and the "hippy"

drug culture. Parents and the community were, not too surprisingly, very upset. With the Vietnam War was protests, the entire country was upset. Even now this period of our history causes much discomfort and uneasiness.

Easy solutions were sought. Schools should go "Back to the Basics" with increased testing using behavioral objectives. Schools should not be fun, but hard work for students. School boards, especially in the northeast with the 1974 oil embargo, were experiencing fiscal difficulties and bread winners, even high level executives, were losing their jobs, so the public was not in a generous mood. In an few cases, the John Birch society was again able to get a member elected to the school board.

Officially many school districts dropped nongraded or open education programs to quiet the public. However, teachers did not forget the joyous experience of watching children blossom in these programs. Many went underground and continued to operate in a nongraded mode within the constrictions of their school systems. How do I know this? Because whenever I have the opportunity to speak about nongradedness or even on other subjects, teachers come up to me and say, "I just had to tell you because you would understand..."

As interest in nongradedness waned in the 1980's research and publication about it also tapered off. Even though an analysis of 37 research studies comparing nongraded and graded schools indicated that a student in a nongraded school was likely to have higher academic achievement, a better self concept, and a more

positive attitude toward school (Pavan, 1977) many educators and the general public did not appear to be convinced. The habit of gradedness which most adults had experienced as children was a hard one to overturn. It appears so much simpler to raise standards such as scores on standardized achievement tests and reading levels in basal readers as hurdles to "pass" in order to be promoted to the next grade level, this is done even as school board policies proclaim that individuals learn at different rates and in different ways.

The publication in 1983 of A Nation at Risk with its inflammatory language unleashed a flood of other reports, but only a trickle of funding much of which was soon resinded or found insufficient to cover inflation. Many of these first wave reports called for more of the same ineffective practices from the past: more testing of both students and teachers (especially if teachers were to receive increased salaries), more class hours, higher standards (meaning more retention in grade levels and more transition classes), more curriculum regulations from state departments of education (possibly even a national curriculum if national testing becomes a reality), and more school days. Governors, presidents, and candidates declare themselves as for education as if others were against education. Maybe the choice advocates are against public education.

However, other voices are being raised about the need, not to merely add more or tinker with education, but to drastically restructure schools as they are now. The Carnegie report (1986)

called for teachers to work together in teams with teachers in part replacing some of the principals' instructional leadership function. These lead teachers will function as the team leaders did at the Franklin School or in a Multi-Unit Individually Guided Education (IGE) program. The Holmes group (1986) has noted how this need for teacher collaboration must change how teachers are educated for the profession and Goodlad (1990) describes how a pedagogy team models the collaborative learning process for preservice teachers.

The Coalition of Essential Schools under Ted Sizer's direction has returned curriculum decisions to the teachers at the high school level with a team of teachers working with a team of students using projects as a major learning vehicle and developing performance based assessments. Junior Highs are now changing to Middle Schools so that former secondary teachers and elementary teachers may combine their subject matter and child-centered strengths to provide for children's needs. Elementary schools, especially the primary grades, are once again considering nongradedness. Incidentally, both the middle school movement and Sizers' Coalition are essentially nongraded schools.

How did this nongraded revival happen? Americans seem to respond when situations reach crisis levels. A Nation at Risk declared a disaster as the nation would no longer be able to compete (Remember Sputnik?) and this is being reinforced by plant closings and lay offs which have led to unemployment in geographic areas and among people not used to losing their jobs.

In addition to the wide spread concern that schools are not working for our "at-risk" children who are becoming an increasingly large part of the school population, more knowledge about grouping and teaching strategies, the restructuring movement which advocates teacher and student teaming, the addition of thinking skills in the curriculum; school boards have become aware of the research on retention and concerned over the numbers of children being retained or placed in transition classes. The school district of Philadelphia has failed 23 per cent of its first graders for the last several years. (Supertendent's MIC, 1990-1991). This fact and other statistics were studied by a Promotion and Retention Task Force which has recommended instituting nongradedness in the elementary schools. Research that retained students generally do less well than promoted students on standardized tests has been available to educators for nearly forty years (Goodlad, 1952), but widespread understanding has only seemed to come with the publication of Shepard and Smith's Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention (1989). School board members are probably becoming aware that retention is not only educationally ineffective, but a very costly policy as more and more students are spending additional years in school.

Some states have looked at their deficient educational systems and declared the need to improve in order to lure new manufacturing plants to their state. Some states had to revamp the entire state department of education and the state educational system in order to revise and make more equitable the financing of education. In

redoing the entire structure, state legislatives have brought in outside educational consultants to assist in the process. The financial squeeze and the awareness that most of past programs for "at risk" or special education students have had minimal success, has enabled state legislatures to look at new ideas or as in the case of Kentucky to relook at a process, nongrading, that had been practiced in a number of their schools according to a 1970 State Department Document.

In one sense nongradedness is being reactivated in a desparate attempt to improve schools. I would not take such a pessionistic view. I believe that thoughtful educators, many of whom have had some actual involvement with nongrading or team teaching, understand that the mechanical, rote, small bits and pieces of information that composes our present lecture, recite and test educational process is dysfunctional. We know so much more about learning and teaching than we knew just fifteen years ago. The brain does not just absorb new information, but seeks to connect it with previous and present learning. Motivation and other psychological principles such as the positive effects of success are much better understood as they relate to education. Instead of one model, teachers are learning a multitude of teaching strategies to apply in different contexts and for different goals. Collaboration between students and between teachers is understood as necessary to increased learning. Many different cooperative learning models are available to achieve the benefits of heterogeneous grouping.

Education frequently follows the trends in business and the recent stress on participatory management know as School or Site Based Management (SBM) has involved teachers in decision making and goal setting within their schools. Like business, education has realized that the talents of teachers have in most cases been under-utilized, at a great loss to the schools.

This time around for nongradedness we should be aware that change is a slow and often painful process. Business and industry do not expect their employees to operate new systems without extensive education and yet, we educators frequently expect teachers to learn new skills in a one day - one shot in-service program. Kentucky provided a five year phase-in period (recently cut to three years by the State Legislature) for nongraded primaries with planning periods, in-service education, and state department of education expertise and publication. Even so, this is a hectic time for them as the entire system is being revamped. The Kentucky plan also requires teacher teams. I believe that teacher collaboration is essential for the successful implementation of nongradedness as several teachers are able to provide more options for children and the synergy resulting from teacher interaction revitalizes teachers.

In the 1963 edition of the Nongraded Elementary School, Goodlad wrote, "It should be clear by now that the nongraded plan is a system of organization and nothing more."(p.59) He does go on to indicate that the structure enables the teacher to become a more creative teacher since both teachers and students are freed of the

grade level confinements. In the 1987 edition John said, "What I would stress now, far more than I did then, would be the philosophy behind nongradedness and how this must infuse much more than merely school structure."

In the period between 1963 and 1987, Pavan (1972) had synthesized a list of 36 Principles of Nongradedness from a thorough reading of the literature on nongrading. A copy was sent to forty-eight writers and practitioners in the field in order to provide feedback as to the clarity, validity, and comprehensiveness of the model. Thirty-nine people (81%) sent back useable completed forms. The responses received were overwhelmingly in agreement with the assumptions in the model. Except for one item (number 18) out of the thirty-six statements at least 70% of the respondents felt each statement was either crucial or important in a comprehensive definition of nongradedness. All but eight of the thirty-six statements were declared to be crucial or important by 80% or more of the respondents. In other words, there seemed to be a generally strong acceptance of these assumptions of nongradedness by writers and practitioners in education.

In the spring of 1987 these items were again sent to the earlier respondents to ascertain their thoughts about the statements at this time. Even with the difficulties of finding people 15 years later such as both retirement and deaths, responses were received from 23 of the original respondents. Suggestions were made for some language changes (for example, substituting "cognitive" for "intelligence". The experts reaffirmed that most

of these 36 statements are crucial to a comprehensive definition of nongradedness.

Once again Pavan used these responses to revise the statements. This time she also realigned the categories and some the items within the categories for a more logical flow. Two dissertations (Guarino, 1982, and Hoffman, 1985) which had used the original list were also consulted. The resulting (1992) version has been used with large groups of teachers and administrators from a dozen different states in training sessions; and these discussions provided useful insight as to the understanding of the items by current practitioners. The present version which enables educators to determine their comfort with and commitment to nongradedness is on Table 1.

The Principles of Nongradedness are divided into six clusters each with 6 items: goals of schooling, organization, curriculum, instruction, materials and assessments. The goals of schooling for nongradedness speak to individual differences (3), students autonomy (1) maximum potential (2) in many areas besides cognitive (4,5), enjoying learning and positive self concepts (6). Grouping and placement are in mixed age ability groups frequently changed based on tasks and needs (7-12). Curriculum differs as individuals differ (13,14,16,18) and integrated subject matter themes (15) using inquiry methods (17) are stressed. A variety of instructional strategies (19-24) and materials (25-30) are used as children expand their knowledge and skills which are assessed by teacher and pupils using multiple data sources (31-36).

Table 1

PRINCIPLES OF NONGRADEDNESS

A. GOALS OF SCHOOLING

1. The ultimate school goal is to develop self-directing autonomous individuals.
2. The school seeks to develop individual potentialities to maximum possible.
3. Each individual is unique and is accorded dignity and respect. Differences in people are valued. Therefore the school strives to increase the variability of individual differences rather than to stress conformity.
4. Development of the child is considered in many areas: including aesthetic, physical, emotional and social as well as cognitive.
5. Each child needs to develop the skills for productive and responsible membership and leadership in civic, social and work groups.
6. The school environment is designed so that children enjoy learning, experience work effort as rewarding and develop positive self concepts.

B. ORGANIZATION

7. Individuals work in varied situations where there will be opportunities for maximum progress. Advancement, retention, and promotion procedures are flexible. Classes or teams of children are identified with labels free of grade-level implications.
8. A child's placement may be changed at <u>any time</u> if it is felt to be in the best interest of the child considering all five phases of development: aesthetic, physical, cognitive, emotional, and social.
9. Grouping and subgrouping patterns are extremely flexible. Learners are grouped and regrouped on the basis of one specific task or interest and groups are disbanded when that objective is reached.
10. Each child has opportunities to work with groups of many sizes, including one-person groups, formed for different purposes.
11. The specific task, materials required, and student needs determine the number of students that may be profitably engaged in any given educational experience.
12. Children and adults of varying personalities, backgrounds, abilities, interests, and ages work together in teams as learners in the collaborative school enterprise.

C. CURRICULUM

13. Children formulate their own learning goals with guidance from their teachers.
14. The unique needs, interests, abilities, learning rates, styles and patterns determine the child's individual curriculum. Conformity and rigidity are not demanded.
15. Broad thematic units integrating several subject matter disciplines are utilized rather than the presentation of isolated bits of information.
16. Sequences of learning are determined for individual students since:
    a) no predetermined sequence is appropriate to all learners;
    b) individual differences in level of competence and in interest are constantly in flux;
    c) there are no logical or inherently necessary sequences in the various curriculum areas.
17. The curriculum is organized to develop understanding of concepts and methods of inquiry, more than retention of specific content learning.
18. Learning experiences based on the child's expressed interest will motivate the child to continue and complete a task successfully much more frequently than will teacher-contrived techniques.

D. INSTRUCTION

19. All phases of human growth; aesthetic, physical, cognitive, emotional, and social are considered when planning learning experiences for a child.
20. Teachers are the facilitators of learning. They aid in children's development by helping them formulate goals and diagnose problem areas. They suggest alternative plans of action, provide resource materials, and give encouragement or support or prodding as needed.
21. Different people learn in different ways, so multiple learning alternatives should be available.
22. Successful completion of challenging experiences promotes greater confidence and motivation to learn than does fear of failure.
23. The process is more important than the product. The skills of learning to learn especially inquiry, evaluation, interpretation, synthesis, and application are stressed.
24. Children strive to improve their performances and develop their potential rather than to compete with others.

E. MATERIALS

25. A wide variety of textbooks, tradebooks, supplemental materials, workbooks and teaching aids are available and readily accessible in sufficient quantities.
26. Varied materials are available to cover a wide range of reading abilities.
27. Alternate methods and materials are available at any time so that the children may use the learning styles and materials most suitable to their present needs and the task at hand (including skill building, self-teaching, self-testing, and sequenced materials).
28. Children are not really free to learn something they have not been exposed to. Teachers are responsible for providing a broad range of experiences and materials that will stimulate many interests in the educational environment.
29. Learning is the result of the student's interaction with the environment; therefore the child must be allowed to explore, to experiment, to mess around, to play, and have the freedom to err.
30. Children work with materials on the level appropriate to their present attainment and move as their abilities and desires allow them.

F. ASSESSMENT

31. Assessing and reporting must consider all five areas of the child's development; aesthetic, physical, cognitive, emotional and social.
32. Assessment is continuous, cooperative and comprehensive to fulfill its diagnostic purpose.
33. The child is directly involved in assessing and interpreting academic (and other) progress, and in shaping plans for future activity and growth.
34. Children's work is assessed in terms of their past achievements and their own potential, not only by comparison to group norms. Expectations differ for different children.
35. Teachers accept and respond to the fact that growth patterns are irregular and occur in different areas at different times.
36. Instead of letter or numerical grades to summarize student progress, multiple sources of documentation are utilized for the reporting process.

(Anderson & Pavan, forthcoming)

Nongradedness appears to be in a waxing phase in the 1990's. Descriptions of nongradedness or the actual term itself have appeared in many of the articles on school reform and in the plans for school restructing. School based management demands that teachers work together to set school goals as part of a school improvement plan and often leads to restructing the school into teams or schools-within schools. Teachers who work together soon begin to redesign the curriculum often on interdisciplinary themes, to better match their student population. The value of heterogeneous grouping for positive self concepts and learning is understood and a range of cooperative learning strategies are available. A wealth of exciting materials and technology can be used instead of sole reliance on basal text books.

If this time around for nongradedness, adequate staff development is provided as teachers are asked to learn to teach in new ways and to become members of a learning community and sufficient time is allowed for these changes to be implemented; then the benefits to children should bring joy to the children, their teachers and especially their parents.

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